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ABSTRACT

This study examined the specific relations and processes underlying the association between marital disturbance and child maladjustment. Data were gathered on 51 9- through 12-year-olds, along with their parents, on specific dimensions of marital discord, children's coping responses to conflict, and child adjustment. Parent reports, child reports and interviews, and children's responses to videotaped scenes of inter-adult conflict provided data for analysis. It was found that children who perceived higher levels of marital conflict: (1) tended to espouse more avoidant coping strategies; (2) felt less competent about their abilities to intervene in the conflict and to make themselves feel better; and (3) were more likely to experience behavior problems than were those from low-conflict homes. Furthermore, parents' reports of marital adjustment were found to be a poor predictor of child behavior problems, despite their frequent use in the literature. (Author/MDM)

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Marital Discord and Children's Coping and Adjustment

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Abstract

This study examines the specific relations and processes underlying the global association between marital disturbance and child maladjustment. Data was gathered on specific dimensions of marital disturbance, children's perceptions of interparental discord, children's coping responses to conflict, and child adjustment using parent reports, child reports and interviews, and children's responses to videotaped scenes of interadult conflicts. Correlation and regression analyses indicated that specific links exist between characteristics of marital discord, child perceptions, and child coping and adjustment patterns. Children who perceived higher levels of marital conflict tended to espouse more avoidant coping strategies, feel less competent about their abilities to intervene in the conflict and to make themselves feel better, and were more likely to experience behavior problems than those from low conflict homes. Furthermore, parents' reports of global marital adjustment were a poor predictor of child behavior problems, despite their frequent use in the literature.

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Background

Although links between marital discord and child maladjustment are well documented, researchers continue to utilize broad-based measures of marital discord and child maladjustment that rely almost exclusively on parent reports. However, recent conceptual models have underscored that children's coping patterns and outcomes are not determined by the actual family environment, but rather by the children's perceptions and interpretations of the family environment. Thus, an important step for future research is to increase the specificity of assessments of marital and child outcome measures, while at the same time broadening the study of the marital subsystem by including other important dimensions such as children's perceptions of conflict. The present study is designed to address these issues by examining precise relations between specific measures of (1) marital disturbance; (2) children's perceptions of marital conflict; and (3) child adjustment.

Method

Participants

Fifty-one 9- to 12-year-olds (25 boys and 26 girls) and their parents.

Measures

Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Test (MAT)
Straus Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS)
O'Leary-Porter Scale (OPS)
Children's Perceptions of Inter-parental Conflict Scales (CPIC)
Achenbach Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL)
Interview responses to videotaped scenes of conflict.

Procedure

Children completed the CPIC, watched four videotaped scenes of angry interactions between couples, and were then interviewed about their responses to the conflict scenes. They were asked how they would feel (Emotional Responding) and what they would do if this happened between their parents (Involvement); how much this response would help make themselves feel better (Emotion Focused Coping Efficacy); and how much it would help their parents to end the argument (Problem Focused Coping Efficacy). Parents completed the MAT, CTS, and OPS while waiting for their children in an adjoining reception area.

Coding

Children's reports of angry, sad, and fearful responses to videotaped conflicts were combined as Negative Emotional Responding. Their intervention responses were rated as no involvement, background, brief, or involved interventions. Coping efficacy was rated along a continuum from "very little" to "a whole lot".

Results and Conclusions

1. As expected, children's perceptions of marital conflict were more closely related to parents' reports of marital conflict than parents' reports of global marital satisfaction (MAT).

2. Child perceptions of conflict (Destructive Conflict and Total CPIC scores) were significantly correlated with children's internalizing problems. Parent reports of marital conflict (OPS) and children's perceptions of conflict were better

predictors of child behavior problems than parents' reports of global marital discord (MAT) (See Table 2).

3. Strong positive intercorrelations were generally found between negative emotional responding, proposed involvement in conflicts, and children's coping efficacy. It is interesting to note that negative emotional responding was unrelated to proposed level of involvement. This suggests that how children feel about conflict does not necessarily predict what they will do, but is related to their evaluations of their ability to make themselves feel better and to help adults end the argument (See Table 3).

4. Children from high conflict homes (OPS) and children who reported feeling more threatened during adults' fights tended to espouse more avoidant coping strategies when handling interadult conflict. Furthermore, children who perceived high levels of interparental conflict were less confident about their abilities to help adults end their arguments (See Table 4).

5. Higher levels of internalizing and externalizing behaviors were associated with avoidance of involvement in interadult conflicts and children's lower ratings of competence about their abilities both to make themselves feel better and to help adults end their arguments (See Table 5).

6. Composite measures of children's perceptions of conflict (Total CPIC and Coping Efficacy) and parent reports of conflict (CTS and OPS) were entered into multiple regression analyses to test whether children's perceptions and experiences with marital conflict were significant predictors of children's psychological problems (Total CBCL scores), irrespective of parents' reports of conflict. Together, children's perceptions and

parents' reports of marital conflict explained 30% of the variance in child behavior problems ($F = 4.91$, $p = .002$). Child perceptions of conflict accounted for 12% of the variance in children's behavior problems ($F = 3.98$, $p = .03$) after controlling for parent-reported conflict. When variance due to children's perceptions of conflict were entered first in the stepwise regression and thus statistically controlled, parent-reported conflict explained approximately 10% of the variance in children's problem behaviors ($F = 3.57$, $p = .04$). Thus, children's perceptions of marital conflict not only accounted for a significant, unique variance in parent-reported behavior problems, but also was a better predictor of child problems than parent-reported conflict.

Table 1

Correlations Between Parent Reports and Child Perceptions of Conflict

	CTS	MAT	OPS
CPIC			
Destructive Conflict	.43***	.27*	.35***
Perceived Threat	.20	.18	.23*
Total Score	.37***	.25*	.39***

*** p < .01
** p < .05
* p < .10

Table 2

Correlations Between Parent Reports, Child Perceptions of Conflict, and Child Behavior Problems

	CBCL	
	Internalizing	Externalizing
CPIC		
Destructive Conflict	.31**	.18
Perceived Threat	.17	.05
Total Score	.37***	.16
Parent Reports		
CTS	.18	.15
MAT	.19	.15
OPS	.45***	.31**

*** p < .01
** p < .05
* p < .10

Table 1

Intercorrelations Among Children's Interview Response Variables

	Involvement	Emotion-Focused Coping Efficacy	Problem-Focused Coping Efficacy
Negative Emotional Responding	.16	.30**	.38***
Involvement		.47***	.43***
Emotion-Focused Coping Efficacy			.63***

*** $p < .01$
** $p < .05$
* $p < .10$

Table 4
Correlations Between Parent Reports, Child Perceptions of Conflict, and Child Interview Responses

	Negative Emotional Responding	Involvement	Emotion-Focused Coping Efficacy	Problem-Focused Coping Efficacy
CPIC				
Destructive Conflict	-.14	.03	.09	-.18
Perceived Threat	.01	-.25*	-.22	-.23*
Total Score	-.04	-.09	-.10	-.29**
Parent Reports				
CTS	-.03	-.03	-.04	-.01
MAT	.10	-.10	.17	-.03
OPS	-.10	-.25*	.01	-.22

*** p < .01
** p < .05
* p < .10

Table 5

Correlations Between Child Interview Responses and Child Behavior Problems

	CBCL	
	Internalizing	Externalizing
Child Interview Responses		
Negative Emotional Responding	-.03	-.11
Involvement	-.28**	-.22
Emotion-Focused Coping Efficacy	-.34***	-.27**
Problem-Focused Coping Efficacy	-.37***	-.28**

*** p < .01
** p < .05
* p < .10

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